

Father hunger:

The world response to the death of Pope John Paul II

by Richard Rohr, OFM

I have been convinced for many years that many male systems are held together by a deep and common form of father hunger. Men who have not had a strong or any father relationship are driven to seek the approval of older men, the reassurance of smart men, the company of stronger men, the blessings of holy men. For many, it is the very name of the whole human game. It creates tribes and teams, it holds together churches, it creates businesses and corporations, it maintains kingdoms. If they have not yet found their own manhood or their own inner power, men find it vicariously through identification with other “important” and symbolic men. They love to serve them. They almost worship them. It is a good way to begin. It is the energy of initial sonship.

But this pattern is so deep and all pervasive that it eventually becomes “the norm” in *adult* male society too. Why wouldn’t you need to please the boss, the old man, the sergeant, the CEO, the Pope? “Isn’t this the whole point?” the un-initiated man assumes. It becomes the very shape and understanding of love, loyalty, success, dedication, patriotism, heroism, war, and even holiness. Often, ironically, much more than their love for their wives or their children! (which is only holy or significant if the father figures say so).

For many Christian men, particularly church men, *the very nature of sanctity is obedience to male authority figures—pure and simple.* Not love, not service, not surrender, not trust, not simplicity, not humility, not prayer, but mere dogged obedience. They feel a deep security having obeyed “daddy”. It frees them from all inner anxiety, responsibility, and struggle, which is so consoling and reassuring that it feels like safety and salvation. If daddy says it is right, then I am somehow in the very arms of God and the bosom of Abraham. After

35 years as a priest, and 13 years in the seminary, I am convinced that the clergy is filled with such souls, as is the entire Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, most businesses and corporations, sports teams, and neighborhood bars.



This, in a word, is why God and country so often go together, why men who are religious are invariably nationalistic too (Then we have *two* sets of approving daddies! And usually a strong “male” God too!) Just observe the patterns of most military men, most church men, or any hierarchical system. They all hold together by building on that primal father hunger, and sometimes on a father wound too, and it is so deep that they cannot usually recognize it within themselves. It just feels “natural”, as most unconscious behavior does to unconscious people.

What is lost, of course, is depth, inner freedom, and true personhood. *They live vicariously through identification with their male leader, and his greatness, and never bother to find their own.* That is the tragedy. Yet it held together most tribes in all of history, most religions, all kingdoms, the Nazis, the Communists, and has always worked for a certain type of Roman Catholic and Evangelical Christian too. The Protestants just substituted a preacher for a pope. Both have to wake up, and let that need and wound draw them toward “the father from whom every family takes its name” (Ephesians 3:15). Inner experience instead of substitute experience.

Much of the First Book of Samuel is concerned with the “tragedy” of having a king! (see Chapters 8, 10, 12) Surprising, isn’t it? The prophets knew the danger of substituting a human father figure for the True Father. Finally Yahweh

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relents and says to the prophet Samuel “Go ahead and give the people what they want, but know that it is not you they are rejecting, but they have rejected me from ruling over them” (8:9). Kingship is always a begrudged concession in Israel, merely tolerated, and an avoidance of their own true and needed sonship. This is later taught more strongly by Jeremiah (31:34) and Isaiah (49:14-16), and finally lived and exemplified by Jesus himself, the ultimate beloved son.

I say all this, as one way to understand the immense worldwide outpouring of grief for Pope John Paul II. People who were not Catholic, people who care nothing about his teaching, Catholics who are barely Catholic, people who disagree with his teaching, found themselves weeping, abandoned, loving him, needing him, missing him, and praying to him! For the Catholic pundits, all their beliefs were validated and he was instantaneously canonized. (This was also done a few months previously with Ronald Reagan, by true believing Republicans). We are clearly dealing with something archetypal here and nothing logical at all. That is the depth and breadth of father hunger in our

world today. Identification with a spectacle and idol becomes a substitute for any real transformation of the self.

If the cult and idolization of John Paul will eventually lead men to search for their own manhood and the True King, it is indeed good. But if it is merely an avoidance of the inner journey, their own inner authority, or the projection of their own power and dignity onto a man safely buried in Rome, this will merely be another example of what the Prophet Samuel warned us against—creating worldly kings instead of becoming sons of the King ourselves.

Heroes are good to get young men started, and John Paul was that on many levels, but eventually we need brothers and companions. “Too big” a father can be a way of remaining ever a son. In the second half of life adult men do not need idols and heroes as much as they need companions, imitable brothers, and men who love with them in ordinary and courageous ways. Few of us will be popes or kings. All of us are men, naked underneath our clothes.

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Father's Day Memory



Richard and his father
(Richard Rohr, Sr. ~ 1910 - 1999)

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